

Historical Solutions to Some Problem Texts in Qur'anic Exegesis

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This paper surveys four problem texts in the Qur'an and addresses specific translation and Christian-Muslim dialogue issues that are attached to them.¹ Firstly, the root of the idea that Allah of the Qur'an and Yahweh of the Bible are not the same objective referent is found in the historical dialogue texts surrounding an adjective of Allah in Q112. Secondly, Q4:171 and 5:73 have been key verses used in dichotomising Unitarian Monotheism against Trinitarian Monotheism. Thirdly, Q9:30 is the only Qur'anic verse to seemingly correct the metaphorical presentation of Jesus as Son of God. These problem texts sit on the three primary tiers of Christian-Muslim dialogue issues.

Hierarchy of Theological Issues in Christian-Muslim Dialogue		Key Verses
Semitic Monotheology	Is Allah Yahweh?	Q112
Uni-/Trini-tarian Monotheology	Is God Unitarian or Trinitarian?	Q4:171, 5:73
Uni-/Trini-tarian Christology	Is Jesus more than human / less than God?	Q9:30

Surah 112 – Allah is (not) Yahweh

In Surah 112, the particular adjective of Allah,² *al-ṣamad*, is a challenge for translators. It has been rendered, “the eternal,”³ “the absolute,”⁴ and, “the everlasting sustainer.”⁵ However, ascertaining the correct translation is not our focus here, rather it is exposing a blatantly incorrect historical translation that led to the development of a very serious vilification narrative. Perhaps the earliest non-Muslim

¹ There are two very important caveats to offer in the introduction to this presentation. Firstly, there is exceedingly little information surviving from the centuries from which our study is derived. Much of what we have is second or third hand, potentially corrupted, and given the vast amount of information which is assumed to have existed at the time, miniscule in representation. Secondly, these observations should be understood as literary and historical probabilities. All historical inquiry is the study of probability. The likelihood of something having happened or not is influenced by the number and quality of the records of the event, the traceability of their transmission through time, and the number and quality of competing accounts of the same events. Humility is appropriate under these circumstances. It may also be noted that much of this material is covered in a forthcoming work by the present author. See C. Jonn Block, *The Qur'an in Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Historical and Modern Interpretations*, ed. Ian Richard Netton, Islamic Culture and Civilization (London: Routledge, 2013).

² It may be noted that “Allah” appears in pre-Islamic Christian inscriptions as the Arabic language designation for the Christian Trinitarian God. An early sixth century inscription by a Kindite princess named Hind is a good example. See Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Mu'jam Al-Buldān* (Beirut: Dar al-Sadir, 1977), Vol. 2, p. 542; Irfan Shahīd, “The Women of Oriens Christianus Arabicus in Pre-Islamic Times,” *Parole de l'Orient* 24, no. (1999); Irfan Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, 2 Vols. (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2009), Vol. I, pp. 696-697

³ M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴ Rashad Khalifa, *Quran : The Final Testament : Authorized English Version, with the Arabic Text*, Rev. 4. ed. (Capistrano Beach, CA: Islamic Productions, 2005).

⁵ Abdalhaqq Bewley and Aisha Bewley, *The Noble Qur'an: A New Rendering of its Meaning in English* (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 2011).

interaction we have with this Surah is in *De Haeresibus* by John of Damascus (w.c. 734)⁶, who translates it, “maker of all things.”⁷

Theodore Abu Qurrah (d.c. 820) translates the term in Q112 as *sphyropēktos*, “barren-built,” in the early ninth century.⁸ The term is easily hijacked into a literal and malicious imagination of something solid, beaten into the shape of a ball. Bartholomeos of Edessa later blended the ideas of John and the vocabulary of Theodore. Bartholomeos misrepresents the term as *Jamet* in Greek, which relates phonetically to both the Arabic *jāmid*, meaning “solid,” and the name of Allah *al-jāmi*’, meaning, “The Gatherer.” In his translation of Q112, he renders *holosphyros* to complete the transformation.⁹

Nicetas of Byzantium capitalised on this same error in the ninth century, and popularised the idea of Allah as a material physical spherical idol.¹⁰ He refuted every aspect of Allah of the Qur’an against the Christian God. He seems to have been quite unaware that his defence of the Christian God in nearly every aspect, is an excellent exposition of Islamic theology. Nevertheless, his ideas were popular, and gave rise finally to the narrative that their god was not our God,¹¹ an important ingredient in the launch of the First Crusade in 1095.¹²

⁶ All dates are presented in simple numerical form, and refer to CE/AD.

⁷ *De Haeresibus* was likely published between 724 and 743. John was grandson to Manşūr b. Sarjūn, who surrendered Damascus to the Arabs in 635. John lost his political position when sometime between 717 and 720 Caliph ‘Umar II issued a decree barring non-Muslims from high political offices. There is much written about John of Damascus, see for example Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It : A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam, vol. 13 (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1997), 485-489; J. H. Lupton, *St. John of Damascus, The Fathers for English Readers* (London; New York: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1882); N. A. Newman, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue : A Collection of Documents from the First Three Islamic Centuries, 632-900 A.D. : Translations with Commentary* (Hatfield, PA: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993); Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The Heresy of the Ishmaelites* (Leiden: Brill, 1972); David Thomas and Barbara Roggema, *Christian-Muslim Relations : A Bibliographical History, Volume 1 (600-900)*, History of Christian-Muslim Relations (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2009), 295-301.. To follow the controversies surrounding accounts of John’s life, this author recommends John Meyendorff, “Byzantine Views of Islam,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 18, no. (1964). Simelidis does not think John to have translated Q112 at all. See Christos Simelidis, “The Byzantine Understanding of the Qur’anic Term Al-Samad and the Greek Translation of the Qur’an,” *Speculum* 86, no. 4 (2011).

⁸ John C. Lamoreaux and Theodore Abū Qurrah, *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, Library of the Christian East, vol. 1 (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 224.

⁹ See Sahas in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Wadi Z. Haddad, *Christian-Muslim Encounters* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1995), 112.

¹⁰ For a most excellent study of the misinterpretation of Nicetas of Byzantium see Simelidis. Simelidis presents that *holosphyros* was very likely an accurate Greek translation of *al-šamad*, though its meaning in the 7th century and earlier was not as crude as presented by Nicetas’ notion of a material ball. Instead, the adjective likely meant ‘solid and dense’, possibly in reference to Allah’s strength, oneness, and indivisibility. A curious fourth century Greek use of similar terminology by Epiphanius of Salamis applies *holosphyratos*, a synonymy of *holosphyros*, to man as God *formed* man in Genesis 2:7. This is one of the metaphorical instances of the word outlined by Simelidis, and is reminiscent of the concept of the Word *becoming* flesh in the Person of Christ. This reading would render the meaning of *al-šamad* as: The One Who is Indivisibly Forged. This opens up the possibility that *al-šamad* may have originally been a reference to the Incarnation in a Monophysitic Christology.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Though Nicetas’ ideas gained popularity quickly, they were certainly not universally accepted. Writing from the time between Nicetas’ texts and the First Crusade, Pope Gregory VII (d. 1085) wrote to the Mauretanian Sultan that, “This affection we and you owe to each other in a more peculiar way than to people of other races because we worship and confess the same God though in diverse forms and daily praise and adore him as the creator and ruler of this world.” See Ephraim Emerton, *The Correspondence of Pope Gregory VII : Selected Letters from the Registrum*, Records of Western Civilization (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 94.

This loose translation and misrepresented theology eventually resulted in the first summary *apotaxis* of, “the God of Muhammad,” as both *holosphyros* (of spherical solid form), and *sphyrelaton* (beaten solid), in the mid-twelfth century, around the time of the Second Crusade.¹³ Formally, the maliciously fuelled *apotaxis* was short-lived, as it was removed by Emperor Manuel I Comnenos in 1180, and the rejection of, “Muhammad and his God,” was replaced with, “Muhammad and his inspirer.”¹⁴ However, the now popular idea that Allah of the Muslims was not the God of the Christians was already dominant, and would remain so in dialogue literature until the present day.

Q4:171, 5:73 – There are (Not) Three Gods

Christianity was widespread on the Arabian Peninsula from the fourth century.¹⁵ Amr ibn Mattā’s *Kitāb al-Mijdal* (Book of the Tower) credits Christianity’s spread to Yemen by 345 to Mār Māri, a missionary with Monophysitic leanings.¹⁶ At least three churches were built on the South coast, and by the late fifth century Paul I, the first Monophysite Bishop of Najrān, was in place.¹⁷ Following the martyrdom of Najrānites in c.520, Byzantium and Abyssinia re-took South Arabia, returning it to Monophysite rule,

¹³ See Sahas in Haddad and Haddad, 109.

¹⁴ Thomas and Roggema, 822.

¹⁵ The Apostle Paul brought Christianity to the North (Galatians 1:15-17, cf. C. W. Briggs, "The Apostle Paul in Arabia," *The Biblical World* 41, no. 4 (1913). The introduction of Christianity in the South is credited to fourth century characters: a mason named Faymiyūn (Abd al-Malik Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīrat Al-Nabawiyah* (Egypt: Dar Al-Hadith, 2006), 38; Muhammad Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muhammad : A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*, trans., Alfred Guillaume (London ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 14-16.), a woman named Theognosta (John of Nikiu and R. H. Charles, *The Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu : Translated from Zotenberg's Ethiopic Text*, Christian Roman Empire Series, vol. 4 (Merchantville, NJ: Evolution, 2007), 69-70.), and sometimes to a bishop named Frumentius/Afrudit (Stanley Mayer Burstein, *Ancient African Civilizations : Kush and Axum*, Updated and expanded ed. (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2009), 112-114; Irfan Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2006), 91-92; Bishop of Cyrrhus Theodoret, *The Ecclesiastical History of Theodoret* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 50ff; Thomas Wright, *Early Christianity in Arabia : A Historical Essay* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1855).).

A fourth century inscription identifies South Arabia as under the rule of the Christian king of Axum, Ezana (r.330-356). It reads, “In the faith of God and the Power of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost who have saved my kingdom. I believe in your son Jesus Christ who has saved me.” F. Anfray, A. Caquot, and P. Nautin, "Une Nouvelle Inscription Grecque D'ezana, Roi D'axoum," *Journal des Savants* (1970).

¹⁶ See Henricus Gismondī, *Maris Amri Et Slibae De Patriarchis Nestorianorum Commentaria, 2 Vols.* (Rome: F. de Luigi, 1896), p. 1 of the Arabic text. Mār Māri was a student of Mār Addai (c.50-150), who has been shown to have heavy Monophysite tendencies. Jan Willem Drijvers, "The Protonike, the Doctrina Addai and Bishop Rabbula of Edessa," *Vigiliae Christianae* 51, no. 3 (1997). Monophysitism was not official until the Council of Chalcedon in 451CE. The heresy held that Christ was one nature (*mono-physis*) God and man. Christ’s divine-humanity distinguished him in nature from God the Father, and therefore the charge of tritheism was levied against the Monophysites, see W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement: Chapters in the History of the Church in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2008). It may interest the reader to note that as Christ was only one nature, Mary in theory became to the Monophysites a very literal Mother of God (*Theotokos*). This exaggerated Mariology as presented by a staunch Monophysite could have elicited the Qur’anic correction in Q5:116.

¹⁷ Philostorgius and Philip R. Amidon, *Philostorgius : Church History, Writings from the Greco-Roman World*, vol. no. 23 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 40-44; Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century*, 86-106. Both Paul I and his successor, Paul II were consecrated by Philoxenus of Maboug, one of the founders of the Monophysite movement, see Irfan Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1989), 374. Both Paul I and II were reportedly martyred by the Dhū Nūwās Masrūq, in c.520, see Amir Harrak, *The Chronicle of Zuqin, Parts Iii and Iv, A.D. 488-775 : Translated from Syriac with Notes and Introduction*, Mediaeval Sources in Translation, vol. 36 (Toronto, Canada: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1999), 78-86; Irfan Shahīd, *The Martyrs of Najrān : New Documents*, Subsidia Hagiographica, vol. 49 (Bruxelles: Societé des Bollandistes, 1971), 46.

building eight new churches, including three in Najrān.¹⁸ In 570, the Persians conquered South Arabia, although, “Monophysitism [had] established itself as the dominant Christian denomination in Najrān, probably late in the [fifth] century and certainly in the sixth.”¹⁹

In 565, John Philoponus passed away, and his teachings subsequently fueled two very controversial monks named Conon and Eugenius.²⁰ John was an overt tritheist, presenting the Trinity as a human concept in *Against Themistius*: “For we have proved that the nature called ‘common’, has no reality of its own alongside any of the existents [Trinitarian Persons] either, but is either nothing at all – which is actually the case – or only derives its existence in our minds from particulars.”²¹ The Philoponian Monophysitic movement freely affirmed the terminology of, “Three Gods,” and, “Three Godheads,”²² and was so famous a scandal in Arabia as to find reference in Ibn al-Qiftī’s (d.1248) *History of Learned Men (Tarīkh al-Ḥukamā)*.²³ It eventually found its way to Najrān.

¹⁸ Irfan Shahīd, “Byzantium in South Arabia,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 33, no. (1979): 29-31. The record of the churches (*Bios 9*) is the only piece of the *Vita Sancti Gregentii* that bears any historical weight at all. Gianfranco Fiaccadori writes of it that, “A part of the *Bios* that certainly goes back to a much older source is Gregentios’ itinerary with the detailed list of churches ... This wealth of information about the Christian topography of South Arabia is still of value even if Gregentios should have been no historical person at all.” See Albrecht Berger, *Life and Works of Saint Gregentios, Archbishop of Taphar: Introduction, Critical Edition and Translation*, Millennium-Studien, Bd. 7 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006), 52.

Byzantium was Monophysitic between Zeno’s Henotikon in 482 until the end of the reign of Anastasius (r.491-518), Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, 373-374. Ties between Byzantium and Axum were strong at the time of the martyrdom in 520.

¹⁹ Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, 363. Cf. Michael Allan Cook, *Muhammad, Past Masters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 10. A Monophysite revival among Assyrian Christians in Persia is highlighted by Henana of Adiabene’s placement as head of the school of Nisibis. Though Nestorianism was likely stronger in population, Monophysitism was certainly gaining ground among the Assyrians. The Monophysite revival in Persia covers the dates of 571-610, co-incidentally covering the time of Muhammad’s life from birth until the time of his first reported revelation. Nestorianism was restored as the official doctrine in 612, “but the influence of Henana and his pupils made itself felt long after in the East Syria Church.” Gerrit J. Reinink, “Tradition and the Formation of the ‘Nestorian’ Identity in Sixth-to Seventh-Century Iraq,” *CHRC* 89, no. 1-3 (2009): 221-223., cf. Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (London ; New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 32-39; Arthur Vööbus, *The Statutes of the School of Nisibis*, Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile (Stockholm: ETSE, 1962), 27-29. There has been some question surrounding the potential identity of Chalcedonian and/or Nestorian Christianity South of Najrān in the late sixth century. This debate has been put to rest now, and the region of South Arabia, from Aden through Sana’a to Najrān has been shown to have been dominantly Monophysitic, see C. Jonn Block, “Philoponian Monophysitism in South Arabia at the Advent of Islam with Implications for the English Translation of ‘Thalātha’ in Qur’ān 4. 171 and 5. 73,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* (2011): 9-13.

²⁰ Uwe Michael Lang and John Philoponus, *John Philoponus and the Controversies over Chalcedon in the Sixth Century: A Study and Translation of the Arbitrator*, Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense. Etudes Et Documents Fasc. 47 (Leuven: Peeters, 2001).

²¹ R. Y. Ebied, A. van Roey, and Lionel R. Wickham, *Peter of Callinicum: Anti-Tritheist Dossier*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 10 (Leuven: Dept. Orientalistiek, 1981), 51. John’s tritheism has also been studied in Aloys Grillmeier SJ and Theresia Hainthaler, *Christ in Christian Tradition Volume 2: From the Council of Chalcedon (451) to Gregory the Great (590-604), Part Four: The Church of Alexandria with Nubia and Ethiopia after 451*, trans., O. C. Dean (London: Mowbray, 1996), 131-138; Joel L. Kraemer, “A Lost Passage from Philoponus’ Contra Aristotelem in Arabic Translation,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 85, no. 3 (1965).

²² Peter of Callinicum quotes John directly: “Now tell me, do you not confess each of these hypostases to be God in a different way? Do not scheme against the number when you say ‘three Godheads’, but if Godhead is not in each of them in a different way, have the temerity to say so openly.” See Ebied, van Roey, and Wickham, 51.

²³ Ibn al-Qiftī calls him John the Grammarian (Yaḥya al-Naḥwy). He is described as a Jacobite (Monophysite) follower of Severus, but that is where the history stops, the remainder is legendary. See Ibn al-Qiftī and Julius Lippert, *Tarīkh Al-Ḥukamā* (Leipzig: Dieterich’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1903), 354ff., and ‘Amrb. al-‘Āṣ (al-‘Āṣī) al-Shamī in H. A. R. Gibb and others, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam: New Edition*, 13 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1986).

Najrān was a center of Monophysitic Christianity,²⁴ and its dominant tribe, the Banū Ḥāritha, had long been aligned to Monophysitism through the Ghassānids in the North.²⁵ Jacob Baradeus (d.578), the Northern Ghassānid Monophysite phylarch, consecrated Conon of Tarsus and Eugenius of Seleucia, during the beginning of his missionary tour between 542 and 578.²⁶ The two monks left Jacob, instead propagating overt tritheism based on the works of John Philoponus.²⁷ Philoponian Monophysite Tritheism likely reached Najrān sometime between 542 and 563, as in 563 Jacob denounced the heresy which was by then widespread among Arab clergy.²⁸

In 631, Abū Ḥāritha b. Alqāma of the Banū Ḥāritha, was Bishop of Najrān. It is reported that he travelled to Medina to meet with Muhammad. Three from his companions are named: 'Abdul Masīh, al-Hyam, and,

Their bishop, scholar, religious leader and master of their schools, was Abū Ḥāritha, who was respected among them and a renowned student with an extensive knowledge of their religion.²⁹

Something of Abū Ḥāritha's doctrine did not sit well with Muhammad, who had been married to a Christian for twenty-five years, and a close relative of a Christian scholar.³⁰ It was during the meeting

²⁴ The *Book of the Himyarites* includes among the clergy in Najrān, "two Arabs from al-Hīra, two Byzantines, one Persian and an Abyssinian." See Vassilios Christedes, "The Himyarite-Ethiopian War and the Ethiopian Occupation of South Arabia in the Acts of Gregentius (Ca. 530 Ad)," *Annales d'Ethiopie* 9, no. 1 (1972): 132; Axel Moberg, *The Book of the Himyarites : Fragments of a Hitherto Unknown Syriac Work*, Skrifter Utg. Av Kungl. Humanistiska Vetenskapssamfundet I Lund, vol. 7 (Lund, Sweden: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1924). Perhaps this diversity accounts for the disagreements between them concerning the nature of God during the meeting with Muhammad: Ibn Hishām, 407; Ibn Ishāq, 269-270; Muhammad Ibn Sa'd, *Ibn Sa'd's Kitab Al-Tabaqat Al-Kabir*, trans., S. Moinul Haq and H. K. Ghazanfar, 2 vols. (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1990), 418-420.

²⁵ Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, 400-401.

²⁶ Frend, 285-287.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 290. Tritheism spread very quickly at least as far as Greece, Rome, Syria, Egypt, and into Africa. By 574 the tritheists themselves were divided into the Athanasians and Cononites. Between 582 and 585 Peter of Callinicum was still managing debates with tritheist bishops in the Byzantine Empire. Muhammad was fifteen years old by this time. See Ebied, van Roey, and Wickham, 8, 22.

²⁸ In 563, Jacob Baradeus denounced the tritheist heresy, now widespread among Arab clergy, in a letter to Constantinople. None from among the 137 signatures originate from Najrān or Ḥafār, in spite of the tribal connection between Jacob and the Banū Ḥāritha, and the established Monophysitism of Najrān. This is very surprising. Under normal circumstances, certainly the Monophysite bishops of Najrān should have signed such a letter. The Persians had not yet come to South Arabia, Abrahā had a good working relationship with the Byzantines, the Ghassānids and the Banū Ḥāritha were tribally connected, and both dominantly Monophysite. The absence of signatories from Najrān and Ḥafār indicates that it is highly likely that South Arabia was the region of concern in Jacob's letter denouncing tritheism. See Jean Baptiste Chabot, *Documenta Ad Origines Monophysitarum Illustrandas*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, vol. 103 (Louvain: Secretariat du CorpusSCO, 1965), 145-156; J. Lamy, "Profession De Foi Adressée Par Les Abbés Des Couvents De La Province D'arabie À Jacques Baradée," in *Actes Du XIè Congrès International Des Orientalistes*, ed. J. Lamy (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1897), Vol. 1, pp. 824-838; J. Spencer Trimmingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*, Arab Background Series (London ; New York: Longman, 1979), 183.

²⁹ Ibn Hishām, Vol. 1, p. 573; Ibn Ishāq, 271., cf.

³⁰ Muhammad's wife, Khadijah, was from a Christian family. Waraqa ibn Nawfal was her uncle, and it is recorded that, "Waraqa attached himself to Christianity and studied its scriptures until he had thoroughly mastered them." See Ibn Hishām, 163; Ibn Ishāq, 98-99. If Waraqa is taken to be a historical character, then these comments come at the likelihood of an excellent command of Syriac and possibly Greek in addition to his own tongue, Arabic. There were nine years between Muhammad's first revelation and the death of Khadijah, and another ten years before his meeting with Abū Ḥāritha. That Muhammad simply did not know Waraqa and Khadijah's Christian trinitarianism enough to warrant a Qur'anic correction

with Abū Ḥāritha that Q4:171 and 5:73 were recited for the first time.³¹ Neither reference contains the Arabic word for Trinity, *al-thālūth* (الثالوث),³² a word in use in Arabic at the time.³³ In the nineteen years of Qur'anic revelations prior to this meeting, no correction of Christian trinitarianism as tritheistic had emerged in the Qur'an. It is therefore the doctrinal difference between Waraqa ibn Nawfal's trinitarianism and Abū Ḥāritha's (likely Philoponian) tritheism that is addressed in Q4:171 and 5:73.

Q9:30 – What Ezra is as Son of God, Jesus is Not

The Qur'an uses two main terms for 'son': *ibn* and *walad*. *Walad* is a wholly carnal term, carrying no real metaphorical meaning and is therefore restricted to references to literal sons.³⁴ It is agreed between Muslims and Christians that God does not have a literal son (*walad*). *Ibn*, however, has both literal and metaphorical meaning in the Qur'an.³⁵ Q9:30 presents a challenge, however, as it is the only

before this time, is irrational. Rather, Abū Ḥāritha's theology provoked a response, perhaps precisely because he spoke of *thalātha* (Q4:171) and *thālithu thalāthatin* (Q5:73) instead of *al-thālūth*, which occurs nowhere in the Qur'an.

³¹ Ali ibn Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī, *Asbāb Al-Nuzūl*, trans., Mokrane Guezzou, Great Commentaries on the Holy Qur'an, vol. 3 (Louisville, KY; Amman, Jordan: Fons Vitae; Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2008), 89; Yaqub Fayrūzābādī and Abd Allah Ibn' Abbās, *Tanwīr Al-Miqbās Min Tafṣīr Ibn' Abbās* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyah, 1987), 86, 98; Abd Allah Ibn' Abbās, *Tafsīr Ibn 'Abbas*, trans., Mokrane Guezzou, Great Commentaries on the Holy Qur'an, vol. v. 2 (Louisville, KY; Amman, Jordan: Fons Vitae; Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2008), 130, 146; Ibn Hishām, Vol. 1, p. 553; Ibn Ishāq, 272; The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, "Quranic Science: Context of Revelation", Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought <http://www.altafsir.com/AsbabAlnuzol.asp> (accessed March 15th 2010).

³² The *Maṣḥaf al-Sharīf* contains no 'wāw' (و) vowel in the terms for 'three' in these verses. See Tayyar Altikilac, *Al-Mushaf Al-Sharīf: Attributed to Uthman Bin Affan: The Copy at Al-Mashhad Al-Husayni in Cairo* (Istanbul, Turkey: Organization of the Islamic Conference Research Center for Islamic History, Art and Culture, 2009), alif/146, alif/172.

³³ The Monophysite debate (527-536) over the Theopaschite formula, "One of the Holy Trinity has suffered in the flesh," included the Ghassānids. That the Arab Bishop did not have a word for a concept so core to Christianity as "trinity" is preposterous, especially since Arab Christian kings had ruled the North since the fourth century. Shahīd agrees, adding that the Nicene Creed was in Arabic in the fourth century already. See Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, 2 Vols., Vol. 1, p. 734-744.

Sidney Griffith has proposed a Syriacism in the Qur'an here, stemming from *tlīthāyā* ('the treble one') as a reference to Christ. However, this does not account for the Qur'anic choice of *thālithu* over *thalūth*, both of which were available in the Arabic vocabulary of Abū Ḥāritha, and highly likely understood by Muhammad himself. See Block, *The Qur'an in Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Historical and Modern Interpretations*; Sidney H. Griffith, "Syriacisms in the 'Arabic Qur'an': Who Were 'Those Who Said 'Allah Is Third of Three' According to Al-Ma'ida 73?," in *A Word Fitly Spoken: Studies in Mediaeval Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an, Presented to Haggai Ben-Shammai*, ed. M.M. Bar-Asher, B. Chiesa, and S. Hopkins (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi-Institute, 2007).

³⁴ Mahmoud Ayoub concedes that when Christians and Muslims debate the Son of God, it is not *walad* that we are debating. He writes that, "Christians would certainly agree with Muslims that Jesus is not an offspring by generation, *walad*, of God, but that he is our brother and the older son in the family of God of which we are all members." See Mahmoud Ayoub and Irfan A. Omar, *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue*, Faith Meets Faith (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 115. It should be noted at the outset that Dr. Joseph Cumming has produced an excellent overview of the meaning of the term, "Son of God," in the Gospel, from a Christian perspective, prepared for a Qur'an literate audience. Joseph L. Cumming, "The Meaning of the Expression 'Son of God'," in *Papers on Theological Issues* (Yale Center for Faith and Culture). No attempt to repeat his work here is necessary. This present section may be considered an addendum to Dr. Cumming's paper.

³⁵From the literal side, the dominant Qur'anic reference to Jesus as son is as the son of Mary ('*Ibn Marīam*): Q2:87, 253; 3:45; 4:157, 171; 5:17, 46, 72, 75, 78, 110, 112, 114, 116; 9:31; 19:34; 21:91; 23:50; 33:7; 43:57; 57:27; 61:6, 14. The Jews are referred to as the children (*baniyya*) of Israel: Q2:40, 47, 83, 122, 211, 246; 3:49, 93; 5:12, 32, 70, 72, 78, 110; 7:105, 134, 137, 138; 10:90, 93; 17:2, 4, 101, 104; 20:47, 80, 94; 26:17, 22, 59, 197; 27:76; 32:23; 40:53; 44:30; 45:16; 46:10; 61:6; 61:14.

From the metaphorical side, in Q5:18 it is said that the Christians and Jews refer to themselves as the sons ('*Abnā' ū*) of God, and as Cumming noted well, that the road itself had a son ('*ibn al-sabīl*): Q2:177, 215; 4:36; 8:41; 9:60; 17:26; 30:38; 59:7. Additionally it may be noted that Old Testament uses for the title 'son of God' or 'sons of God' is not at all limited to references to Jesus. The term refers to angels (Gen. 6:2, 4; Job 1:6, 2:1; 38:7; Ps. 29:1; Dan. 3:25). Erminie Huntress notes that the most common referent of the term son of God in the Old Testament is the nation of Israel (Ex. 4:22-23; Deut. 1:31, 8:5; Hos. 11:1,

Qur'anic refutation of Jesus as ' *ibn* of God, and therefore the only case of a direct Qur'anic refutation of a potential metaphorical meaning for the term Son of God as ascribed to Jesus.

The title ' *ibn Allāh* in Q9:30 directly relates a Christian view of Jesus to a Jewish view of Ezra. Parrinder suggested that Ezra and Jesus are highlighted as objects of saint-worship in Q9:30-31 and thus it is the competition between Jesus and Ezra in the minds of Christians and Jews, that is under scrutiny in the Qur'an.³⁶ But where is this veneration of Ezra by the Jews, or competition between the Jews and Christians regarding Ezra and Jesus, in history? Is there a historical contextual key? The Jewish veneration of Ezra is easily established. Louis Feldman notes,

Ezra is said (Koheleth Rabbah 1.4) by the rabbis to have had such stature that he would have been high priest even if Aaron himself were then alive. Furthermore, we are told (Yoma 69b) that he reached such a level of holiness that he was able to pronounce the divine name "as it is written". Indeed, he is one of five men whose piety is especially extolled by the rabbis (Midrash Psalms on cv 2). ... In short, it is not surprising that this glorification of Ezra reached such proportions that in the Koran (Sura 9.30) Mohammed accuses the Jews of regarding Ezra as the veritable son of God.³⁷

To the competition between the Jews and Christians concerning Ezra and Jesus, I propose that the 4 *Ezra* text may help, especially since it was likely to have been in the hands of Abū Ḥāritha during his meeting with Muhammad.³⁸ 4 *Ezra* is an originally Jewish text, attributed to Ezra, but dating from after 70. The text was corrupted by Christians who added the phrase "my son" to precede references to "the Messiah." 4 *Ezra* 7:27-29 reads,

And whosoever is delivered from the predicted evils will see my wonders. For *my son* the messiah will be revealed together with those who are with him and he will gladden those who survive thirty years. And it will be, after those years, that *my son* the messiah will die, and all in whom there is human breath.³⁹

13:13; Jer. 3:19, 3:9, 20; Mal. 1:6; Ps. 80:16). During the period between the Old and New testaments, the terms 'son(s) of God' were removed from the Jewish scriptures, "not only to repudiate the idea that the Messiah was to be the Son of God, but to deny that God could have a son at all." Erminie Huntress, "'Son of God' in Jewish Writings Prior to the Christian Era," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 54, no. 2 (1935): 118.

³⁶ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 128, 157.

³⁷ Louis H. Feldman, "Josephus' Portrait of Ezra," *Vetus Testamentum* 43, no. 2 (1993): 192-193.

³⁸ The text is also known as *The Apocalypse of Ezra*, and comprises Chapters 3-14 of 2 *Esdras*. The text is contained in the Peshitta Syriac Bible, thus Syriac as the liturgical language of Najrān in the early seventh century as shown above makes the presence of this text during the meeting between Abū Ḥāritha and Muhammad in 631 a likely scenario. This is made more likely considering the Najrāni history of Jewish-Christian conflicts in the sixth century. The text was controversial and widespread enough to warrant an Arabic version originating from Kufic, which places the text in Arabic hands in the early seventh century at the latest. See F. Leemhuis, Albertus Frederik Johannes Klijn, and G. J. H. van Gelder, *The Arabic Text of the Apocalypse of Baruch* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 5; P. Sj. van Koningsveld, "A New Manuscript of the Syro-Arabic Version of the Fourth Book of Ezra," in *Selected Studies in Pseudepigrapha & Apochrypha: With Special Reference to the Armenian Tradition*, ed. Michael Stone (Leiden: Brill, 1938).

³⁹ The italics in the quote indicate the emendations to the Jewish original added by Christian scribes, altering the text decidedly from Jewish to Christian in nature. See Joshua Bloch, "Some Christological Interpolations in the Ezra-Apocalypse," *The Harvard Theological Review* 51, no. 2 (1958): 89-90.; Cf. 4 *Ezra* 7:28-29, 13:32, 37, 52; 14:9.

Joshua Bloch noted that the word 'son' often replaced 'servant' in emendations of the text by Christians.⁴⁰ Interestingly, the Qur'an specifically establishes the title 'servant' against title 'son' in Q4:171, and thus we may find there as well an echo of the debate between Christians and Jews on the corruption of the 4 *Ezra* text, in the context of the meeting between Muhammad and the Najrāni Christians.⁴¹

The 4 *Ezra* text was available in Syriac and Ethiopic, the two languages of Axumite dominated South Arabia between 525 and 570, and quickly followed the development of Arabic into Kufic script. The Jewish martyrdom of the Najrānites and the re-Christianisation of Najrān in 525 provides adequate atmosphere for a long standing debate over a disputed text as volatile as this one.

4 *Ezra* was hijacked in Syriac, Ethiopic, and Kufic, by Christians, in order to ascribe to the Messiah the Sonship of God in the voice of the saintly hero of the Jews. The Qur'an in Q9:30 may be addressing both sides of an open debate on textual corruption between Jews and Christians. It indicates that whether Ezra or Jesus are sons of God (Q9:30) or venerated saints (Q9:31), "the title and the two referents here are taken from particular instances of near verifiable Christian textual *tahrīf* of the Jewish 4 *Ezra* text, and must be dismissed."⁴² The Qur'anic meaning according to its phraseology here equates the two metaphors, and therefore whatever is meant by the Jews regarding Ezra's relationship to God, is denied by the Qur'an as appropriate for Jesus.

Conclusion

If *al-Ṣamad* of Q112 is a solid spherical idol, then certainly Allah cannot be Yahweh. The historian can follow this line of reasoning to find in it the evolution of the Christian, "their god is not our God," narrative, although Christians no longer lean on this original mistranslation in order to fuel this continuing narrative. Yet the learned dialogician is compelled to ask whether a narrative built on malicious scholarship to fuel a millennium of war is any longer an appropriate position for a humble orthodoxy? Appropriate questioning of this dominant narrative can be challenging, but as Miroslav Volf exemplifies in *Allah: A Christian Response*, it is not impossible.⁴³

The Qur'an in Q4:171, 5:73, and 9:30 speaks into real historical controversies of Muhammad's day. The input it provides not only parses between the kinds of Christianity expressed on the Arabian Peninsula in the early seventh century, but also draws the reader in the direction of a kind of orthodoxy for Christians. The Trinity is not addressed, but tritheism is flatly forbidden. And whatever is meant by Son

⁴⁰ Huntress and Bloch both also noted an Ethiopic text that preserves the original rendering of vv. 7:28-29. See *ibid.*, 80; Huntress: 121.

⁴¹ Cragg argues that the meaning of 'servant' in the Qur'an aligns with its meaning in the Gospels and Phillipians 2. He comments, "For the faith in the Oneness of God as a triune Lordship derives from the role of Christology and Christology – as always inside theology – stems from the person and deed of Jesus as the Christ. In the sense we must realize from 4:172, 'Sonship', with or without a capital 's', underwrites them all. Given the predilections of Islam about Allah, which we can also approve on their own ground, we do well to let the thrust of Surah 4:172 take all else that matters into its scope. For it is one of the rare and precious occasions when a Quranic meaning-in-place dramatically coincides with a counterpart in the New Testament vocabulary. There is a veritable meeting of theme and fact." Kenneth Cragg, *The Qur'an and the West* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 144.

⁴² Bloch, *The Qur'an in Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Historical and Modern Interpretations*.

⁴³ Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011).

of God, Jesus is neither *walad Allah*, nor to be equated with a Jewish veneration of Ezra surrounding a corrupted text. Thus the question is not only to what kind of Christian the Qur'an is speaking, but to what kind of Christianity it calls its Christian readers.

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